

H. Abbera, Policies for Girl Students and Realities for Women Journalists in Ethiopia Context

## Policy Topics

# Policies for Girl Students and Realities for Women Journalists in Ethiopia Context<sup>1</sup>

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## Ethiopia, an Introduction

Ethiopia is located in the horn of Africa. It is Africa's third most populous nation with over 75 million inhabitants. In terms of settlement, majority of the people live in rural areas and only 15% of them live in urban areas.

More than 85% of the population lives on agriculture. Women outnumber men in population and they play a pivotal role in development. But this is not reflected in resource distribution of the country. Women have not got equal access to education and right to land, for instance. The literacy rate is 42.7%, where women's share is just about 35.1%.

Due to socio-economic and cultural reasons, women have been disadvantaged from exercising their right; access to education is one area where women have not enjoyed equal benefits as men. As a result of these constraints, women do not hold key positions in various sectors of society.

## Modern Education in Ethiopia

Modern education was introduced to Ethiopia in 1941, that was during the regime of Haile Selassie who ruled Ethiopia from 1930-1974. In those early years, education at all levels was for free and with incentives like

clothing, school materials and boarding.

Since its beginning, the education system of the country has passed through three basic phases, each reflecting the interests of successive governments' policy and strategy.

From the foundation of modern education in the country till the fall of the imperial system, the officially stated objective of education was to help Ethiopian civilization. It was considered as a means to educate and train citizens on how to respect their king, country and religion.

This objective was completely revised when the Derg military junta came to power in 1974 and stayed until 1991. During this era, the focus of education was for development of the country through nurturing of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the curriculum was revised accordingly. And it continued like that until the 1991 change of government.

The current regime's motto for education has been 'education as a tool for poverty alleviation'. Thus, the state's rhetoric both in research and teaching has been on problem-solving research and approach to teaching.

## Girls' Education in Ethiopia

Though the education sector in Ethiopia has seen promising growth in recent years, participation of girls is still far from satisfactory. In most cases they are disadvantaged due to social, cultural and economical factors.

If we look at historical records of Haile Selassie and the Derg, girls and women's participation particularly in higher education was insignificant. For example, during the year 1961/62 academic year, the university college of Addis Ababa had a total number of 950 students and only 39 were women.

The situation seemed a bit improved particularly at elementary level during the Derg period. Though, girls' educational enrolment increased at primary level, it was very low

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in the secondary and tertiary levels. In those days, due to limited number of colleges and universities, the competition for higher education was tough for all, but even tougher for the majority of girls.

A girl student finds it difficult to make the time for studying and preparing for exams as she is also responsible to household tasks unlike the boys, who are somehow exempted from such kind of activities.

The call made by the current government for private investors to participate in education sectors has played significant role in increasing educational enrolment in the country. Educational enrolment at higher education has increased from 18,000 in 1991 to 147,000 in 2003. Of this total 111,685 were male and 36,269 female.

In the private institutions of higher learning, more than 50% of the students are women living in urban areas whereas in the institutions run by the state, female enrolment is far below 20%. Thus, the publicly run universities are still dominated by males.

This indicates that most of the female students in the rural areas have not got the opportunities for higher education. The competition to pass the national exam and join the government universities and colleges is very tough for most rural women. Though there is a possibility of continuing education at private institutions, the fees are expensive and unaffordable for women from rural areas.

Since most private universities and colleges are centered in urban areas, rural women need more facility to attend higher education in addition to the school fee. Most of the time, these factors force them in to early marriage.

### **Factors that Disadvantage Girl's Education**

Generally speaking, children have no opportunity to choose whether they want to go to school or not. It is parents, neighbors, community elders who decide about primary schooling of children in developing countries like Ethiopia. Due to socio cultural and

economic factors, sons are favored when it comes to getting the opportunity of going to school.

Early marriage, lack of income in the family, as well as domestic chores is among the reasons that disadvantage girls from education. Some parents forbid girls from going to school for fear that if they get educated, girls refuse to get married and/or they do not find a man who marries an educated girl. In most rural parts of Ethiopia, girls are a good source of family income by means of bride price when they get married. Therefore, parents might choose to forbid their daughters from going to school or force them to marry at earlier age.

And also poor economic background of the family affects girls' education more than it affects of boys. In a family where there is not enough money to send all children to school, it is obvious that girls remain at home and take the responsibility of the household tasks and wait for their marriage proposal.

Besides, rape and unwanted pregnancy, family breakdown, loss of parents due to HIV/AIDS or other illnesses are again factors which affect girls/women's schooling more than they affect the education of boys.

### **Positive Actions to Improving Women's Education**

Efforts are being made to avert the impacts of the negative factors by various actions. For instance, I can cite the current government has given more attention to women's issues.

Considering the significant number of women's population in the country and their marginalization in society, the attention given by non-governmental organizations is also encouraging.

On the part of the government, establishment of Women's Affairs Bureau under the prime minister's office and its recent upgrading to full-fledged Women's Affairs Minister is seen by many as a good move towards ensuring women's equal right in the

various sectors of the country. Improving the status of women's education is also one area where the government has shown its commitment to women's issue.

The new constitution revised in 1994 on its Article 35 No.3 states that due to the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination that Ethiopian women have suffered and taking this in to account, and in order to remedy this legacy, women are entitled to affirmative measures.

Thus, the affirmative action grants a special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.

From a legal point of view, the family law was revised. The revised family code states that legal marriage is when a girl reaches 18 years old and above. The criminal code on Rape is also revised to 5-25 years imprisonment.

In the areas of employment and education, affirmative action and quota system have been introduced as policies to fill the gap of women's participation in different sectors of society.

Education is one of the sectors where girls are taking advantage of the policies. They are entitled to join departments of their choice in colleges and universities even if they score less than males. The quota system requires every department of higher educational institution to give 20% of its total student intake capacity for women students. This is believed to increase female students' chance of joining departments of their choice.

Affirmative action and quota system are also expected to be considered by government institutions while employing new staff and promoting existing ones.

In the past two decades, civil societies have been mushrooming and playing active role in area of gender. The involvement of non-governmental organizations on women's education has also a great input in improving their life.

They are involved in material provision,

gender awareness creation, and provision of pocket money as well as building girls' boarding schools are some of the provisions.

NGOs like Action aid Ethiopia (Menschen für Menschen), and Asia- Africa Joint Effort program are but few examples.

These days, establishment of girls' club in schools has become a common place. Through the clubs, girls will be aware of their human rights, challenges and ways out of the problems. The clubs are also a forum to enable them to discuss various issues that concerns them. Under girls' club most schools also provide tutorial classes to help them to be competent with boys.

### **Television in Ethiopia, History**

The idea of having television station in Ethiopia was initiated in 1956 when a silver jubilee exhibition commemorating Emperor Haile Selassie's coronation was televised by a foreign crew. Since that day steps were taken towards the establishment of a station at a country level.

Today after 60 years of experience, the Ethiopian television broadcasts programs in four local languages and one in English. It is the only television station in the country and it is under the government.

### **Women Journalists in the Ethiopian Television (ETV)**

Women's participation in the job sector in general is limited to some kind of jobs which are labeled as "feminine", like secretarial, nursing and teaching at primary schools. On the other hand, some professions have traditionally been dominated by men. Journalism is one such profession.

The Ethiopia television is a good example of institutions with skewed distribution of men and women. The majority of female ETV staff do administrative work as secretaries, office girls and cleaners. Thus, only few women join media houses as reporters, even fewer

women join as editors or managing editors. Men dominate in the professional work. Even the few women practicing journalists are concentrated in posts of reporting.

Although there is no systematic research on women journalists' participation from the beginning of the institution at the Ethiopian Television, a small survey I conducted in 2008 indicates the employment of women journalists has been increasing. But, there is a long way to go for the number to be comparable to that of male journalists.

In 2003, for example, the number of women at the station was twenty two whereas there were one hundred and twenty three men journalists.

Recently women journalists' situation in the station seems changing both in terms of their employment and educational qualification. The number of women journalists has now reached its record high that is 50 against the number of men which stands at 189.

### **Women Journalists' Educational Background**

Basically, The Ethiopia Television requires a first degree in Social Science or Diploma with 2 years work experience to recruit a reporter.

There is no requirement of educational background in journalism as there was no mass media training or journalism institution until very recently. Mostly, people who studied any of the social sciences used to join the profession. Currently, graduates of the newly open schools of journalism are given priorities in recruitment.

Based on a research made in 2003, the majority of women Ethiopian Television journalists were diploma holders and only few had first degree and above while most of the male journalists are B.A. and above. There were also some senior women journalists who were recruited from high school mini media, a legacy of times when there was not enough trained personnel.

However, compared to the previous times,

more women are now bachelor degree holders and those with no degrees are attending extension classes to upgrade their educational career. Besides, there are more women on the position of senior reporters, deputy editors and editors. However the gender gap at the most high levels like posts of editor-in-chief and desk directors of different language services is still wide. Over the past five years, for example, there were only two women heads of desks i.e. the news and entertainment desks.

### **The Role of Ethiopian Television in upgrading Women Journalists' Education**

Considering women journalists' limited educational background and competence, the opportunities for long term and short term trainings both inside and outside the country provided by the institution is unsatisfactory.

When there are offers for trainings, those in higher positions are likely to grab them. This affects all but women most, as there are only few women in higher posts.

Besides, the possibility to be nominated by their editors or chief editors to trainings is low because everybody wants to use the rare opportunity.

But it is not all dark. There are positive things as well. After the opening of the Mass Media Training Institution, the Ethiopia Television as a policy has been sponsoring journalists to attend diploma courses. In the past five years, the Ethiopia Television has provided scholarship for about 22 women journalists. Among them the three of them are pursuing degree program, one goes to masters program in journalism and communication, the rest 18 go for diploma courses.

The agency makes the scholarship offer both for women and men journalists, but most of the time men do not prefer being sponsored particularly for diploma and degree programs. They prefer to go to night classes after work for further education as self sponsored students. This makes them free from any

service commitment they should have made after completion of their education if they were sponsored.

The reverse is true for women, especially married ones as they prefer to be sponsored which means a study leave with pay. They say because of the sponsorship, they can focus on their education and family. For women who are single, though, attending night classes after work is not a challenge as they do not have family responsibility.

### **The Effect of Competent Women Journalists' Participation on the Media**

"Educating a woman is educating a family," as an old promotional logo from UNICEF says to put emphasis on returns of girls' education to society. It is also true that educating a female journalist means a lot in influencing the content, theme, and approach to media reporting.

My experience shows that, men highly prefer to work on politics and economic issues while most women journalists are inclined on producing programs which have social themes including women, health, and family as well as children's programs. So, if a woman who is assigned to work on these themes is educated, her knowledge and skill will be reflected on quality of her news and program productions for a better societal change. The possibility of using recent information and data is also high.

Moreover, an educated woman is courageous to take up fieldwork assignments since she is aware on how to manage challenges in the villages and bushes. It is also an adventure for most young women journalists to go for field works. This helps to produce a program that encompasses social issues from urban to marginalized rural areas.

I strongly believe in the view that says media is a key for the development of a society. It is a tool to educate, inform and advocate for the better today and tomorrow of a nation.

It is a means to challenge policy makers

and implementers. Since women are primarily affected by social, economic, cultural as well as political aspects of one's country, the role of competent media women is crucial.

### **My Experience as a Journalist at the Ethiopian Television**

Journalism is my second career. After I graduated from the Addis Ababa University in 2003, I worked as a teacher at primary school for a year. Then I took interest in working for the media and applied for a job at the Ethiopian Television. I completed the required formalities of recruitment and was employed as a reporter at the Ethiopian Television Agency in July, 2004. There were around 11 men staffs at the English service desk when I joined. I was surprised not to find at least one woman journalist there.

Before starting the job, I was given a two weeks on the job training of journalism at the then Mass Media Training Institute. Through my two weeks briefing, I found the new job even more interesting than I thought and moved to the actual work with enthusiasm.

Of course, journalism is a job different from my first job of teaching. While teaching, the audience is limited to the specific classes I conducted at a time. However, in journalism, it is like communicating with a far broader audience and dealing with national and international issues.

I was recruited as a reporter, and worked for a year. Then I was promoted to senior reporter. Another year and I competed for a deputy editor position through an internal job announcement, which I also succeeded to get it.

### **Reasons for Cherishing the Profession**

Since I became a reporter I happen to be more curious and informed about the day to day events both of national and international importance.

Journalism is a team work; a single story

is interlinked from the reporter to cameraman, driver, story editor, video editor and transmitter at least. I can say that I have learnt how to work with people harmoniously. Moreover, I have had chances of visiting places which are accessible only to few people because of my job as a journalist. The state house and the Prime Minister's Office are among them.

The career gives chance to meet more people every day which most of the time are sources of media related part time works. I have also had the opportunity of trainings. But, of all the benefits I appreciate the opportunities to travel both inside and outside the country.

Through my up country travel experiences, I got the opportunity of visiting some of the towns as well as remote villages which I did not know before. These helped me to understand my country better.

My first international exposure was in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo in 2005. I went there representing the government media on the occasion of the establishment of a media networking on Population and Development across Africa. It was organized by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). I was also a member of the steering committee in the process of forming the network. I traveled to Kinshasa twice and also Dakar, for this purpose.

Two years later, I was also selected by a Norwegian Government Aid Program called Fredskorpset to work in Dare es Salaam, as a volunteer journalist. Institutionally, I was attached to the Tanzania Media Women's Association for 10 months. During my stay in Tanzania, I participated in different activities of the association particularly on the campaign against early marriage and Female Genital Mutilation. I was also writing feature articles to the Tanzanian newspaper called 'The African'.

Besides, I had chances to attend leadership training programs in Kampala and Mombasa in different times.

So far, through my 4 years experience as a journalist, I have gained experiences and exposures which have left enormous positive impacts on my personal development, future academic and job aspirations. I have also met a lot of good people who are now my best friends.

## **Challenges**

### **Inside the Institution**

For instance, women journalists are disadvantaged when it comes to distribution of opportunities. Participation in international trainings, meetings as well as sponsorship to a post graduate program on journalism and communication are mostly taken up by male staff.

People who are at the leadership position, who mostly happen to be men, make use of these opportunities.

### **In my Public Life**

Working for the government media affects the nature of one's social engagement a great deal. It is believed that the government media is the 'mouth' of the ruling party and most people assume that all journalists are also members of the party.

Thus, whenever, they meet a journalist from the government media people feel uneasy at least, or intimidate and insult at worse. This situation got worse during the 2005 election period.

Some restaurants near by the Television agency refused to serve lunch to the journalists and I also heard from my colleagues that they encounter trouble in their social life, and even in the family.

Personally, during the 2005 election, I took the highest care not to be seen on the screen and when it was a must to do, I tried to hide my appearance, changing the way of dressing or hair style. I used to change the means by which I get to office and got home as early as I could. Once up on a time, I was asked to get

off from the taxi by the driver as soon as he noticed me that I work for the Television. I tried to explain that getting a transport service is my right though it did not help my case. The argument continued, and he reluctantly took me where I was going to.

### **Future Plan**

I believe that so far I have got a good deal of experiences through my careers, both teaching and journalism. They have given me a chance to explore the world around me better. I think now is the right time to go back to school and reflect on my experiences.

I have also plans to travel more, both inside my country and outside the world.

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